



Advice Trainhopping 101: Using Digital Scanners

(self.vagabond)

submitted 25 days ago * by [huckstah](#) [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#)

One of the early tips that I learned during my first year of trainhopping were the advantages of using a handheld digital scanner for hopping freight trains.

Often, at some of the hop-outs that we hobos use to catch trains, you will also see [railfans](#), aka foamers, observing the trainyards and local railroad traffic. When first meeting this interesting subculture of train enthusiasts, it was no surprise to me that they would have camera devices. But much, much more interestingly enough, especially from a hobo's standpoint, was that most of them also had another nifty digital device: Handheld Digital Scanners.

After talking to a few of these railfans, I was able to learn how I could use a digital scanner to my advantage as a hobo, and

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many, many other hobo's have done this as well. Why? They are cheap, they are lightweight, and they are extremely useful for hopping trains. Say no more.

The three main types of discussion you will here on a railroad scanner are:

- **Conversations among the train crew members:**

These conversations will contain very useful information for a hobo, such as departure times, destinations, and reports to security. You will also hear basic information that will let you know what the entire trainyard is doing, which will give you a general idea of which trains are doing what, making it easier to spy on the train you want.

- **Conversations between dispatchers and train's "head end" (engineers):**

These conversations will let you know what YOUR train is doing. If your train is stalled and sided-out, for example, you will hear information on how long your waiting time will be, and when future side-outs will occur. You will also hear other basic conversations that will let you know when your train is about to arrive/stop at a trainyard, or get full clearance to roll through.

- **Talking defect detectors:** These will usually announce "no defects". Some of them will also tell you the train's speed, or the number of axles the train has, or even the outside air temperature.

These announcements will contain important information

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such as the milepost (location) of your train, how many cars are attached, the speed of your train, and other interesting tidbits that could be useful.

As you can see, there is a TON of useful information that a hobo can use to their advantage while finding a train to catch, as well as pertinent information about the train they are already on.

Fortunately, for the frugal hobo, handheld digital scanners are actually quite affordable.

Example: Assuming that you are sitting just a few hundred yards outside of the trainyard, or actually on a train, you can get by with a fairly cheap scanner that will be able to pick up most, if not all, railroad communications.

Since most hobo's are on a tight budget, I recommend the cheapo **Baofeng UV-5R**.

These cheap little scanners are less than 30\$! Not only cheap, but they are also very light-weight, compact, and have VERY long battery life. They even come with a "low power" mode for hobos that need to conserve power and can't get to any electrical outlets to charge up.

I have personally used this radio, and it's all you'll need as trainhopper. Can you get better and more expensive scanners? Always. But for the price and weight, this is a great scanner for any hobo needing to scan the right frequencies.

As a hobo that's sitting in a trainyard or on an actual train itself, you aren't going to need all the fanciness of the more expensive brands. Others may argue, but I can personally vouch for the

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Baofeng as a long-term trainhopper. It's a great device to have if you can afford it.

When you get your digital scanner, the first thing you will want to do is setup your "scan mode" to only target the known railroad frequencies. That way, you won't be confused with ambulance, fire, police, and other communications that are completely irrelevant to the trainyard.

All radios come with a manual to explain how to access and set the parameters for their scan mode. After reading your radios specific instructions, you will want to set your scan range to channel range:

159.810 - 161.565

That is, 159.810 being the first parameter, and 161.565 being the last parameter. That way, your radio will constantly scan all of the channels in-between those preset channels, and will constantly be listening for any communication that may be taking place on any individual frequency.

(Sidenote: All of this may sound very confusing to those of you that are not very tech-savvy or radio-friendly. This included me when I first purchased a scanner. To make this easier for greenhorns, simply begin by studying one thing about your scanner: Scan Mode. Just read the instruction booklets section on "Scan Mode", enter the above-mentioned parameters (159.810 - 161.565), and that's all you will need to know when starting out. Study the other "technical" stuff later!)

It will be the scan mode that will become the hobo's best friend.

Just sit next to the trainyard, turn on your scanner, set it to "scan mode", and let it scan away. Within a matter of minutes, or likely even a few seconds, you will hear various information that will help you tremendously in finding the RIGHT train!

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[–] **JeremiahGlass** 12 points 25 days ago

You are an inspiration on top of being a seemingly endless wealth of rich information for any aspiring hobo. God bless your work [/u/huckstah](#).

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** **Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** **S** 5 points 25 days ago

No problem. If you have any other suggestions for articles, let me know and I'll try my best.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **JeremiahGlass** 2 points 25 days ago

Thanks! Will do once I'm on the road. Or if i can think of anything in the meantime. Safe travels.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **DataPhreak** 1 point 25 days ago

A guide to identification numbers and markings would be awesome. Especially if you can get pictures. You should also put links to all your guides on the sidebar of the sub's main page.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **huckstah** **Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** **S** 1 point 25 days ago

The links are on the sidebar

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[–] **DataPhreak** 1 point 25 days ago

Oh cool! I never noticed them cause they collapse.



[–] **AnarchistBusinessMan** 6 points 25 days ago*

Adding to this [radio reference](#) will help you locate more of the frequencies you will want to monitor.

You can use [this](#) list for US frequencies.

And [this](#) list for Canadian frequencies.

[National Weather Service](#) and Environment Canada as an added bonus.

Many of the frequencies are the same for the (main) rail services and all the same for the weather services in Canada and the US. If your scanner has an option for banks you may want to put in some of the frequencies for major police services or Public Safety. You may find that some are using a trucked system but there many places still have repeaters that aren't.

I'm going to add a little more to this. If you have a phone you can also stream feeds from your phone using [Briadcastify](#). This might not be realistic as something to depend on but in a pinch it might help a bit. You aren't going to find many of the rail feeds but you could get lucky.

If you have a laptop you could also consider using a [SDR dongle](#) and software like [SDRsharp](#). These can even be setup to run on some android phones. This is the hardest way to go about it and not the cheapest (well the dongles only cost around \$15) but an option is better then none.

edit: Added more information

permalink



[–] **zleepoutzide** 2 points 24 days ago

Whoa, thanks for linking that Baofeng scanner! That's a great fucking deal. Super cheap, 7oz, really compact. I'm gonna get one and give this scanner thing another try. I own a Bearcat 220xlt but at 13oz and the size of a damn Nalgene (not really), I don't bother carrying it. I can never understand radio chatter, anyway, but maybe in smaller yards and while riding it'll be easier.

permalink



[–] **Teardownstrongholds** 1 point 17 days ago

That's a Ham radio. Get a license (\$15 and a few hours study) if you are going to transmit on it. Transmitting without

a license carries huge fines and they can track moving transmitters.

That being said these radios can hit repeaters and let you talk to people all over the country so it would be a great way to stay in touch. I think the sub is [/r/amateurradio](#). Wasteland Communications Corp might also be a good place to ask for info if you want someone outside the Ham mainstream

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